

## Luck, passion, networks and skills:

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Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 129

Luck, passion, networks and skills: the recipe for  
action below the radar?

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## Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a growing, and sustained, academic interest in social networks in both individual and community wellbeing and their contribution to local quality of life. This has translated into a series of policy initiatives, linked to the concepts of ‘communities in decline’ community cohesion and democratic deficit. Under New Labour, these included Health Action Zones, New Deal for Communities and a range other area based initiatives. These themes have been retained by the Coalition Government, though with substantially less resource, in the form of the Community Organiser’s Programme, the Centre for Social Action and, within the Cabinet Office, the idea of behavioural nudge at both an individual and neighbourhood level. The underlying assumption of these initiatives is that strong social networks can, by themselves, build community resilience and increase levels of self-help within even the most marginalised communities.

This working paper critically examines such assumptions. Drawing on the theoretical literature and a series of primary research interviews with members of small ‘below the radar’ community groups, it questions the nature of social networks within community activity. Further, it explores the interplay, in theory and practice, between social capital and other forms of capital (human, financial, emotional and knowledge) in terms of the creation, development and sustainability of community groups.

### Keywords

Community groups, capitals, resources, skills, knowledge, networks, emotional labour, community action.

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## Introduction

Earlier Third Sector Research Centre working papers have made the case for the importance of the 'below the radar' (BTR) groups in civil society noting not only the scale of this part of the sector (McCabe & Phillimore 2009) but the key role of BTR activity in meeting need and undertaking functions not generally covered by the state or registered civil society organisations (Phillimore & McCabe 2010; Ramsden et al. 2011). The TSRC paper *Seeing and doing: learning, resources and social networks below the radar* (McCabe & Phillimore 2012) used social network analysis to examine the ways in which BTR groups emerge, develop and learn with a particular focus upon describing the motivations, skills and networks that BTR groups accessed and utilised.

This paper presents a further analysis of the social network data with a particular focus upon using a theoretical framework developed from the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1993), Coleman (1988), Foley and Edwards (1999), Jasper (1998) and Becker (1964) to analyse the types of capitals and resources utilised by BTR groups. In particular, this working paper we ask what types of capital and resource do BTR organisations use when they establish? How do the capitals and resources required change as BTR groups consolidate? And what relationship exists between the different capitals and resources? While this paper is intended to provide a largely theoretical reflection upon the ingredients necessary for BTR action it can also contribute the practitioner and policy understanding through seeking to identify processes and patterns by which BTR actions evolve, establish and grow. Understanding the factors necessary for successful and sustainable BTR action remains crucial both to understanding ideas of community wellbeing and the implementation of a range of current and historic policy initiatives – from localism to the Community Organiser's Programme.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the literature on different forms of capital linked to a policy overview which provides a summary of the relationship between theory and practice followed by a presentation and discussion of key research findings.

## Theoretical Background: Capitals and Resources

Holding of capitals (including networks, knowledge and access to resources) has been argued by Bourdieu (1984; 1993) to be central to the dynamics of fields or as Savage et al (2005) contend, the structure of class relations. Civil society might be argued to be a specific field, a distinct sphere of activity emerging from the bringing together of different types of capital or resources for the common good. The legitimacy and usefulness of capitals depends upon both the field in which they are located while agents' holdings of particular types of capital can help shape the nature of those fields.

The concept of capital has moved beyond the academic literature and has been, for at least a decade, been highly influential in policy formation (Field 2003). However, little attention has been paid to the interactions between capitals in civil society and the ways in which capitals combine to shape

fields underpinning social action. The vast majority of attention has been focussed upon the role of social capital, with a particular emphasis on Putnam's political science perspective "*without a strong associational life citizens would lack the skills and inclinations necessary to work together to generate desirable civic traits*" (Foley and Edwards (p148)). Yet, as Bourdieu argues, it is not just the presence of associations that determine the dynamic of fields but the combination of appropriable capitals that can be mobilised by social actors for common good. In this paper we consider the nature of different capitals or resources and how they may interact to enable social actions to occur within the field of civil society.

As noted, much of the attention to capital, particularly in the sphere of civil society, has focused upon social capital. Looking to Bourdieu (1986) and a sociological perspective, social capital may be defined as "*differential access to resources via the possession of more or less durable relationships, constructed through an endless effort at institution*"(p142). Emphasis is placed upon the ways that institutional rites can help transform relations into durable obligations. The amount of social capital possessed depends on the extent of a social network and the volume of capital that individuals within that network possess. The key here is the appropriability of resources. Social networks alone do not make for social capital but the presence of networks is necessary to broker access to different resources (Foley & Edwards 1999). Networks are thus a means to accessing other forms of capital or resources but not a resource in themselves. Foley and Edwards note that the socio-economic context of network determines the availability of resources and that the more diverse the network the more likely a wide range of resources will be accessed. Coleman's argument that social networks are the only form of capital that has a public goods nature go some way in explaining the pre-occupation with the relationship between social capital and civil society. Social capital has the potential to benefit all members of a network. Furthermore it is productive and can enable achievements to occur that would not otherwise have happened.

So if social capital facilitates access to resources that can be used for the common good, it is important to consider the nature of the resources that may be appropriated. Much of the literature around resources and capitals in civil society has focused upon the importance of membership of associations in working towards common goals (Putnam). This approach has been criticised with membership being argued to be a source of social capital rather than evidence of its existence (Foley and Edwards 1999). Further, much of the literature, and by extension policy development, has assumed that social capitals, or networks, are almost entirely positive. The 'dark side' (Field 2003 p 71) of social capital is rarely addressed or acknowledged with the extent to which social networks are used to exclude, restrict 'other's' access to resources and maintain pre-existing privileges and inequalities ignored.

Less attention has been paid to the role of human capital in civil society action. Becker (1964) describes human capital as the "knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals" and includes any capital gained via schooling, training, or work experience. Becker outlines the

importance of human capital to modern economies arguing economic success “depends on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves” (292). Indeed, little is known about what human capital brings to civil society or how participation in civil society might help produce human capital. Given that human capital resides within individuals it seems likely that skills, knowledge and expertise possessed by network members will constitute a key resource for civil society actions and collectively social capital: if they can be appropriated.

The role of financial capital has been given consideration in relation to economic development. Financial or economic capital is defined as possession of wealth or income that provides physical resources that aid achievement (Coleman) or as control over economic resources including cash and other assets (Bourdieu). Financial capital can have function in itself or may be converted into physical capital: machines, equipment or other capital assets, including buildings that enable production. The extent to which civil society actors can acquire or control financial capital, perhaps accessing it via social networks or human capital, is known to shape their ability to act. Levels of income are one of the key statistics collected in order to describe levels of civil society activity with level of income being treated as a proxy for extent of activity (Clark et al 2013). Yet previous research has shown that in small scale civil society or “below the radar” action, finance may be less important than other resources (McCabe & Phillimore 2012).

A further measure frequently used to help understand activity levels is the number of volunteer hours civil society organisations are able to mobilise. Time is a further form of capital which may be considered human capital in that it is the input of energy by humans into an activity, or as economic capital because only those who can afford time can invest it. As such volunteering time may only be possible if the individual can spare the time and/or has the financial resource to volunteer (Bourdieu 1986). The extent to which civil society actors can attract volunteers to offer time to support their cause is likely to determine their ability to act. In this regard it may be important to consider the ways in which civil society actors mobilise resources such as social networks or human capital (i.e. organisation skills) to reach out to, and involve, volunteers.

Another area of capital that has received scant attention in the field of civil society is emotional capital. Jasper (1998) defines such capital as emotional regulation for the purpose of delivering a task where “*emotion is an action or a state of mind that makes sense only in particular circumstances*” (p400). There is little work on the role of emotions outside of the social-psychology literature. Jasper seeks to examine the potential role of emotion in social protest by reviewing literature in the field. He distinguishes between transitory, context specific, emotions that are usually the reaction to events or situations and affective emotions which impact upon bonds and loyalties and argues that “most motivations far from subverting our goal attainment help us to define our goals and motivate action towards them” (p421). He believes that effective social protest can utilise emotion as a resource either to recruit volunteers to fight for a cause, perhaps through harnessing anger about a situation, or utilise affective emotion to build trust and shared identities thereby securing loyalty and long-term

support for a cause. Reactive emotions may provide motivation for the formation of social networks dedicated to social goals while affective emotion might provide the social glue to help support or sustain such social networks and sustain the 'emotional labour' of activism (Anderson 2013). Emotional connections to either cause, or the individuals participating in a cause, may attract further individuals to a social network thus diversifying its characteristics and increasing the potential to access other types of capital possessed by network members.

Finally, a further gap in the literature on civil society and capital is the influence and role of environmental capital in civil society (Claver-Cortés et al 2007). Yet environmental concerns – whether globally related to threats to bio-diversity and the quality of the natural environment – or locally (involving campaigns against road building, airport development or housing conditions) have been key areas of civil society engagement and motivation for action: from international Non-Governmental Organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to neighbourhood level tenants and residents associations actions.

There is clearly great potential for all the capitals discussed above to contribute to the dynamic of civic society actions. It is important to explore if, and how, these capitals are accessed, how the relationship between different types of capitals operates and the implications of this for policy formation and implementation.

## Policy context

As noted, following the work of Etzioni (1993) and Putnam (2000) there has been substantial policy interest in the concept of social capital and the potential of social networks to address a wide range of social issues – from poverty alleviation (McCabe et al 2013) through to promoting mental wellbeing (Cheung and Phillimore 2013). Much of this has focused on concepts of citizenship, neighbourliness and civic participation as a means of building community cohesion, promoting resilience at an individual and community level (Norman 2012) and enhancing the quality of community life. The assumption which underpins much of direction of policy over the last decade at least has been, in an increasingly diverse nation, that *'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings....facilitate co-operation within and amongst groups'* (Cote and Healy; 2001 adopted by the Office for National Statistics) and that that the well connected are more likely to be *"housed, healthy, hired and happy"* (Woolcock, 2001:12).

At one level, policy debate of the role of social capital has become increasingly sophisticated with attention paid to the various forms of social networks – from bonding capital (characterised by strong/close bonds based on family relationships or ethnic/religious identity) through to bridging or linking capital (looser, but wider relationships between disparate individuals and communities) (Gilchrist 2009). However, as with the academic literature, there has been little attention paid to the interplay between forms of capital, and particularly (in austere times) financial capital in sustaining small scale community activity (Rowson et al 2010)



Despite this, there has been a continuity in both New Labour and Coalition administrations in the assumptions that social networks, social capital 'in its own right', are a powerful tool for policy delivery and community change. Under New Labour, this involved a range of initiatives, post the 2001 riots in Bradford and other northern cities - and subsequently the events of 9/11 in the New York and 7/7 in London – including Connecting Communities, the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Respect agenda – that mechanisms which enabled the development of bridging or linking capital could support both community cohesion and act as a tool for combating extremism and radicalisation.

This concept of social capital as a policy tool also informed broader community focused interventions throughout the 2000's with a particular emphasis placed on the role of networks and networking in returning power to communities (CLG 2008), engaging in the modernisation of public services and promoting political engagement (HM Government 1999). These ideas were also evident in New Labour administrations interventions intended to enhance the professionalism and capacities of small community based organisations to respond more effectively to policy and societal changes. Take Part, Community Engagement Networks, and subsequently Regional Empowerment Networks – all stressed the role of inter-group networking (and some formal training) as a means of strengthening communities (HM Government 2009).

At least some of these themes have been retained by the Coalition Government – albeit with a slightly different agenda. Post-recession, the focus has been on social capital as a means of building community resilience and capacity to survive hard times and as a means of changing individual and community behaviours through 'nudge' and the networking of pro-social behaviour (Cabinet Office 2010). Big Society, whether as a political aspiration or a smokescreen for cuts (Coote 2010), may have come and gone. However, social capital – and assumptions on what this can deliver – has remained a constant. Networking can aid social mobility (HM Government 2011). In the form of asset based community development, strong local networks and enhanced levels of community activity may enable communities to withstand natural disasters or other emergencies (Cabinet Office 2011), address poverty (Church Action on Poverty/Oxfam 2009), promote health improvement (Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2011) thereby reducing GP waiting lists and hospital admissions and as a consequence, reducing fiscal pressures on the State and facilitating the aspirations of the Localism Act (2011) – with communities enabled to engage in new rights to challenge, buy and manage statutory sector assets and services. Whilst this extension of community rights may be welcomed in principle, questions do need to be raised about the effectiveness of social capital, networks, alone to deliver in reality. Networks may aid engagement, but without other forms of capital communities may not be able to exercise these rights (McCabe 2011, Raine and Staite 2012).

Such policy initiatives have been accompanied by attempts to measure and quantify social capital. Surveys at both the local level (CLG 2010) and nationally (ONS 2009, ONS 2011) have included social capital questions on:

- Levels of trust: did individuals trust their neighbours/consider their neighbourhood a safe place to live
- Membership: the number of clubs and societies people were members of
- Networks: the level and frequency of contacts with family, friends and neighbours.

These, however, remain largely numerical measures which fail to address issues such as the purpose and quality of social interaction, the outcomes of networking activity or power relationships in and between social networks. The frequency of contacts and the level of active membership of civil society organisations therefore becomes a proxy, and unqualified, measure of social good.

This paper now moves on to discuss the methods used to research the capitals mobilised in small scale civil society actions and how these relate to the theories and policies outlined and attempts to 'measure' social capital in the introductory sections.

## Methods

This working paper presents a re-analysis of the TSRC social network mapping or "family tree" data collected in 2011 and early 2012 (McCabe and Phillimore 2012). The method employed was based around an in-depth organisational history approach whereby research participants, generally the key activists in community groups, explored their social networks and resource requirements at three stages of their group's development. The first stage was establishment of the organisation: why and how a set of activities came about. The second was a critical moment in the organisation's development, which they were asked to identify themselves, and at which their social networks and/or resource requirements changed to enable or indeed hinder development. The third was the present moment with some speculation about needs in the future.

All the organisations involved in the research had at least begun their lives 'below the radar' as unincorporated associations that did not appear on the data-bases of regulatory authorities (e.g. Charity Commission) and still primarily operated at community level. Respondents were encouraged to reflect over the story of their group's establishment and evolution and covered a wide range of issues such as how and why they came together as a community group, how and what the group learned over time, the relative importance of different types of skills and knowledge, how their needs and requirements changed over time, and how knowledge and resources were acquired beyond the immediate group, and the extent to which these moved around civil society as group members perhaps formed or joined new organisations.

The study was conceived as a pilot which aimed to use a mapping tool to record how skills and resources were acquired, mobilised or lost over time and to enable us to identify and track further case studies linked to the pilot studies for investigation at a later stage (see for example Gilchrist, 2009; Rowson et al., 2010). Thus, it was hoped the pilot would ultimately offer a sophisticated tool for understanding the 'family trees' of networked community organisations. The research was

underpinned by the assumption that community groups would be able to identify ‘critical phases’ in terms of their development and change. As discussed in some depth in McCabe & Phillimore (2012), respondents were generally unable to distinguish critical phases, seeing particular, important, events as part of the ongoing development journey of their group – rather than defining and distinct moments. Therefore, in this paper we identify two phases: establishment that is the period over which the group came together and decided upon a course of action; and consolidation that is the period when they began to deliver the services, manage the asset or undertake the actions that were fundamental to their mission.

### Research participants

Interviews were conducted at 11 venues (including community hubs) with 16 representatives from small, volunteer based, community organisations between March 2011 and January 2012. The sample was selected, drawing on a range of community networks, to reflect the diversity of below the radar activity, different geographical settings (rural/urban, inner city/peripheral estates) and communities of interest. It also focused on groups that had sustained themselves over a number of years. The characteristics of the groups participating are summarised in Table 1.

The groups in the pilot study shared certain common characteristics. All started ‘below the radar’ as unincorporated associations, but had moved over time to gaining some kind of legal status. All had been successful and were visible within (though not necessarily outside) their own communities and had achieved their original objectives. With two exceptions, all the groups, and the services they delivered, were run by unpaid volunteers. The groups with paid staff had a single worker or a small, mainly part time, team which in one case was a recent development. Each group had achieved what they had set out to do and negotiated their way through barriers that others might have struggled to overcome. Our intention is at a later stage, to undertake interviews with groups that had ‘failed’ i.e. had ceased to operate having not achieved their original objectives although this presents certain methodological challenges. Such an approach, exploring ‘failure’ as well as ‘success’ can also inform about the types of resources, skills and knowledge that are required to sustain and develop community action. However, as a sample of successful community organisations, there are valuable lessons to be learned understanding how below the radar groups develop, and examining the factors which facilitate their growth, particularly as the research took place against a background of the recession, austerity measures and cuts to voluntary and community sector funding.

**Table 1: Groups participating in the research**

Name	Location	Primary purpose	Activities
Brownston Village Hall Development Group (BVH)	Rural	Community hub/ meeting space	Provides space for a diverse range of local groups and activities. Fundraising.

			Social events.
Canute Flood Action Group (CFA)	Rural	Campaigning	Lobbying for flood defences. Fundraising. Social events.
Central Africa Communities Association (CACA)	Community of interest/ identity	Representation/ cultural identity	Social events. Representation (immigration and nationality). Social history.
Cobalt Connects (CC)	Market town	Area improvements	Asset management. Social events/ fundraising. Informal learning opportunities. Promoting the local economy/green initiatives.
Faith in Volunteers England (FIVE)	Community of interest/ identity (faith groups)	Volunteer networking.	Volunteer support. Development of volunteer opportunities in faith based organisations.
Hadrian's Wall Tenants and Residents Association (HWTRA)	Peripheral estate	Advocacy and representation	Representing tenants. Estate management. Social events. Community clean-ups.
Heritage Hall (HH)	Peripheral estate	Community Centre/Hub	Preservation society. Local history group. Friends of the park. Coffee shop/snack bar. Community festival.
Hopes 4 All (H4A)	Peripheral estate	Multi-purpose faith based organisation	Pre-school group. Youth work. Dance group. Faith activities (Bible classes etc).
Noham Village Shop (NVS)	Rural	Service provider: community shop	Volunteers running local community shop. Fundraising. Social events.
Oddington Hall (OH)	Peripheral estate	Community centre/hub	Neighbourhood regeneration. Room hire.

			Social events. Community development.
Stop It Now (SIN)	Peripheral estate	Community responses to domestic violence	Support groups. Advice and counselling.

## Findings: Emotions and personality

Emotions were extremely important resource in the initiation and later continuation of voluntary action. Groups were often established in response to strong transitory emotions which were reactions to information or events in specific contexts (see Jasper 1998). Concern, anxiety or worries were commonly cited motivators. For example Hadrian's Wall Tenants and Resident's Association (HWTRA) described the beginning of their group as *"just two concerned residents who was worried about the state of their blocks"* while Browton Village Hall (BVH) and Heritage Hall (HH) were worried about the future of their community centre. Awareness of, and concern about, an unmet need was also a common motivator. In some circumstances emotions could become heightened and emerge as an angry response to a situation that was perceived as requiring urgent action. For Canute Flood Action Group (CFA) this was an environmental problem, the 26th flood in 23 years, described as *"the last straw"* but elsewhere anger was directed towards the human instigators of problems. HWTRA were angry about the way they were being treated by the local hospital and came together to "fight" *"they feed off each other and won't take things lying down basically"*. In the case of Stop It Now (SIN), the group was established in response to *"something that happened to a friend of mine and I was angry and cross about it, and that's really....you know, that was the thing, it's the passion"*. The word passion was used frequently by respondents to describe the feeling underpinning their work. Some argued that passion was necessary to bring people together around a shared purpose while people who had *"a particular passion about their area"* (Cobalt Connects - CC) were more likely to offer their time and knowledge to help out in that area. Volunteers would offer their time to organise fund raising activities and events if they were enthusiastic about the subject. Pleasure and love, again rarely discussed in the academic literature, were further motivators. For CFA it the response was highly personal

*'my father died early in the campaign and it was a difficult time, but it sort of spurred us on. It gave us the energy to carry on and see through what he had been trying to do on his own for 20 years.'*  
(CFA)

Over time, as groups moved from establishment to consolidation, affective emotions increased in importance and respondents spoke of love of the community, group or of a particular resource *"a love of the area, love of the building, just so....how I feel"* (HH) or the sheer pleasure of being part of the group *"spirit fun and laughter have to part of the process"* (CC) *"we all enjoy it so much"* (HH). Feeling valued was an important factor in getting people to remain active as was having shared interests. CFA noted that they were better able to keep energy levels high in short campaigns. Over time

passion and anger could both dissipate, be hard to sustain, or actually be counter-productive (HWTRA).

If emotions provided the motivation for action then a combination of personality, skills, time and expertise were required to help define and deliver goals. Social actors needed to be resourceful and creative with lots of ideas about how to take their action forward. Respondents also spoke of being determined *“really just a determination that we would succeed and that other people felt we could succeed. My attitude was that failure was not an option”* (CFA) or assertive. Individual members were highlighted as playing an important role because of their personality traits *“I’d like to say negotiation, but it’s better to say you don’t mess with Kathy”* (HWTRA) *“she is a force of nature”* (Faith in Volunteers England -FIVE). Energy and enthusiasm were also critical at the early stages, as was having the right leadership. Leaders needed to be democratic, self-reflective team members able to inspire other people and find ways to develop a shared vision and involve all those who were interested in participating. The right communication skills were also critical not only to stimulate interest in the group or activity *“she’s very good at talking and people will listen to what she’s got to say”* (HWTRA) and secure their involvement but also to ensure the smooth running of the group *“some confrontations can happen just because somebody hasn’t asked in the right way”* (Oddington Hall - OH).

Respondents gave examples of the kinds of interpersonal skills that had been crucial to the success of their groups. Being able to motivate people was important, as was networking widely and getting on with lots of different, sometimes difficult, personalities to achieve a common goal. As well as inspiring and motivating people it was also important to engage with individuals who could *“calm people down”* (HWTRA). HH stressed the need to *“get on with all people....because I mean everyone’s different....and just accepting everyone, you know”*. HH, and other respondents, noted the importance of making new members feel welcome *“then I came along and I met Barbara and Isabel and they were just so fantastic and so welcoming”*. Some individuals were described as inspiring, able to keep people involved even when things did not appear to be going well....*“he was a real inspiration”* (HH). In addition patience was important both in terms of the personalities involved in voluntary action and the pace of progress. For example, BVH described the persistence required, over an eight year period, to secure the funding for the redevelopment of the village hall.

Over time, respondents argued that confidence became more important *“have confidence in yourself and your group to articulate your voice in front of powerful people”* (Hopes 4 All –H4A). Confidence enabled groups to take risks and to move in new directions. For example, Central Africa Communities Association (CACA) moved from an informal group of refugees playing football, to providing immigration advice and support for newly arrived asylum seekers and on into a group raising awareness of the contribution of African communities to the social and economic life of the UK. At the consolidation stage being friendly and welcoming continued to be important as was being flexible and adaptable enough to take advantage of opportunities *“she’s a very dynamic person”* (BVH)

## Social Networks and Capital

Respondents identified that having members who were well networked was a major resource for any group or activity. Length of residency in an area was a key variable as this tended, in the right person, to impact on the scale of local connections. BVH, FIVE, OH and CFA were able to pinpoint specific individuals who were “*good at networking and bringing all the village together*” (BVH). Just being well-networked however was not enough to make a difference to the group. As Foley and Edwards (2003) suggest, social networks needed to help groups to access resources if they were to be classified as social capital. Thus while FIVE had a volunteer “*she’s worked with everybody*” it was also important for that volunteer to know what skills were available and then “*draw them in*” (CFA). Furthermore, personal connections to local institutions were also important in helping groups to gain support for example from Parish and County Councillors (CFA) or the police (BH). Individuals could be identified in many of the groups who could be labelled community bricoleurs (Soteri-Proctor & Alcock 2012). These people were heavily involved with a wide range of groups at the same time and were able to bring skills learned in one voluntary activity to another as well as connect to, and recruit, individuals with necessary skills into the group. Thus new groups benefitted from the knowledge and experience of those who had helped out at schools, run playgroups, participated in the Parish Council and joined local “friends” groups.

Some groups actively sought to make connections. They ran monthly networking meetings or went out into their communities and talked to people in a bid to build connections. Often they found that people preferred to work together in pairs or groups, to organise activities. Sometimes they used personal networks to try and galvanise people into action “*it was just a fluke phone call to me because I don’t come church or anything but he telephoned me for someone’s number and he was looking for volunteers. So I rang round some friends and we all came to the meeting*” (HH). They also connected with other voluntary organisations and went to watch them in action in a bid to learn from their experiences of responding to particular issues: for example Noham Village Shop (NVS) and BVH visited other community owned shops and centres to design their own in ways that took account of different local contexts. The majority of respondents were able to access advice, guidance and information through linking to other organisations, often via an infrastructure organisation. Thus CACA were given advice by their local voluntary sector network on funds and how to apply; HH gained similar advice from the voluntary network in their city; FIVE heard about how to recruit volunteers from the Association of Volunteer Managers and OH sought advice from Community Matters about specifics such as length of lease, public liability insurance, disclaimers and accessed training through the Pre-School Learning Alliance. Groups were particularly keen to attend networking events run by infrastructure organisations, finding the connections made extremely valuable for accessing information and inspiration. Volunteers and group leaders also tended to lean heavily on the family support either with specific activities or to help out at events “*we have support from all our families don’t we? Any special event, everybody’s here to help out*” (OH).



CC was unique amongst our respondents in its use of social media. They built activities around their social media network and used Twitter and Facebook to attract volunteers *“we all do bring our networks because they go and tell their friends”*. HH was the only other respondent to use technology to stay in touch with people. They used text messaging to tell people about events and activities. This use, or rather apparent lack of use, of social media by small community groups requires further investigation.

While social networks were critical to accessing volunteer time, expertise and skills, respondents were also able to point to a range of benefits for individual participants and their communities. Most important perhaps was the development of affective emotion as friendships formed through joint endeavour. A volunteer at HH described how she has made *“the closest friends ever”* as an activist at her group and had relied upon them heavily for support when she was bereaved. Others pointed to the development of a sense of community through shared actions. For NVS, this involved drawing in recent ‘incomers’ to the village living on a previously isolated new housing development. For CFA *“the campaign helped to integrate people in new housing in the village who had been out on their own and a bit isolated before. It was all about a community becoming a real community”* while HH described *“the other big thing is here it’s the community, because the community spirit is brilliant isn’t it”*. CACA made links with African groups across the UK and were instrumental in the establishment of groups in other locations, whilst CC found that new businesses emerged from the networks made during their meetings.

Although groups valued their local networks some did struggle to move beyond them to link into institutions of power *“as a small player it can be difficult to have a voice or get in from of the right people”* (OH). Indeed, those groups that succeeded relatively quickly (CFA) highlighted that a key contributory factor in their flood defence campaign was having ‘vertical’ networks with politicians and others in positions of authority – as well as the bonding capital evident within the group itself.

Over time, within their locality groups continued to use activists’ networks to reach out and involve local people who had a specific skill that they needed. But at this consolidation phase they reached out further, and in a more strategic way, predominantly to other groups *“you have to work in a team and with other groups as well...you can’t really be your own organisation you’ve got to work together with every other group”* (HH). Whereas, at the establishment phase, social networking was about accessing knowledge or skills to help build the group, at this later stage the exchange of resources via networks was more of a two-way process. CACA learned about how to access funds from other groups and also helped other groups to establish while BVH was in regular contact with other shops to *“share and learn”* and for HWTRA: *“we’ve got all this support and its basically pretty much on our doorstep, and they teach us stuff, and as I say we provide something back so it’s a learning experience”*. Involvement in organised networking activities helped groups to expand their networks *“I work with about 50 groups per year”* (OH) as did visiting other similar organisations elsewhere.



Realising the importance of networking, some groups became much more pro-active about reaching out. BVH attended peer learning trips to other management groups and held regular volunteer meetings to keep their volunteers involved and active.

Infrastructure organisations played an important role in the development of bridging capital. For example, Rural Community Councils and Plunkett Foundation helped groups to connect with others with similar interests. NVS used the annual shops conference as an opportunity to meet and learn from others rather than from the speakers. The Learning Alliance helped HH to check they were “*doing things properly*”. HWTRA used the Communities and Local Government funded Guide Neighbourhood Network to access peers who they said were more accessible than experts in terms of advice and guidance. They used their local contact regularly “*the main things with XXX is that if they haven’t got the experience, they’ll know somebody who knows type of thing*”.

CC increased the range of its connections to local businesses to the point where they had 90 local sponsors offering services they could access if necessary. BVH built a good connection with their Parish Council and was able to influence them to raise the precept and cover the shortfall in their funds for village hall development. As the critical mass of local residents involved in CC expanded, they found they were able to come together to oppose local plans or make requests and became “*the voice of the people*” (CC). Many members were also part of other voluntary organisations and acted as conduits for knowledge and information, and occasionally other resources, to flow between groups. Through CC’s networking activities, local businesses began to support each other and sometime introduce new services, for example, developing websites to promote local businesses.

## Human Capital

One of the key functions of social networks was to access human capital. Well-networked members reached out to individuals in the community who they knew possessed the skills needed and then used a combination of emotion and personality to draw them into the social action. Rather than sharing skills, in the early stages of a group’s development, people took on specific roles according to their skills. Success was dependent upon identifying the right combination of skills “*most of it is about simply identifying what we’re good at letting people do it*” (CC). Respondents struggled to prioritise one set of skills or knowledge over another stating that everybody brought something which “*helped with the research, organised fund raising events or did things like provide lighting at those events or get bands to perform*” (CFA). Skills were predominantly said to have come from volunteers’ professional lives: either employment or running a business “*so I saw the need and, because of my background, which I was trained as a scientist, I went....I put it in writing, went round and talked to people*” (CFA). Skills and knowledge also sometimes came from formal training, though more often from life experience “*not necessarily just formal courses but, you know, sharing what information they have, sort of, sharing the learning that they’ve had informally*” (HH). CACA were unique in that they applied their skills to setting up a voluntary organisation having been unable to access employment in

the UK. Going through the process of establishing and organisations was said to be an excellent mechanism for finding out how the UK voluntary and statutory sectors operated.

The skills utilised came in many different guises. Particularly important in establishing a group was project management or organisational experience. Respondents cited project and financial management, organisational, team working, accountancy, human resources, business and administration skills as useful *“we know that we need financial skills in both organisations.....you need somebody who can batten that down and help to run it”* (HH). Such skills were mainly gained through work in the private sector. For example, the Chair of NVS effectively managed the community shop whilst running their own business. Within CC, key activists in local resident activity were also business people. There were instances of skills coming from the public sector or trade union activism: *“well she’s a sister back at the hospital and she.....so she’s obviously got organisational skills and all that kind of stuff”* (HWTRA). Fundraising skills also often came from those who had previously been active in either the voluntary or public sectors.

At the early stages of an organisation there were few specific technical skills or information required. Most of the skills needed tended to be generalist: knowledge about procedures, marketing or health and safety. As organisations became more established and began to run events and activities their requirements changed and they needed specific knowledge or abilities. OH needed to know how to teach dance and make outfits for performances with young people. This in turn required them to understand and develop safeguarding policies and procedures. HH needed specific knowledge about the history of the building and the local area and how to use this knowledge in their marketing strategy.

The need for information technology skills was common across most of the case studies. Most organisations had a volunteer with at least a basic knowledge. Both HH and HWTRA had individuals who trained others to be IT literate. CC was heavily dependent upon web-design and strategic management skills, using their website that was the basis of their organisation’s networking and promotional activity. They, FIVE and CFA were all able to find somebody who could construct a website for them *“we were lucky that there was a web designer in the village who set up a really professional looking website to raise our profile”* (CFA).

Six of our respondents also stressed the importance of research skills in helping to set up their organisations and ensure that they were meeting the needs of local people. Each of these organisations benefited from a volunteer who had learned research or analysis skills at work. They were able to develop research tools, either as a paper based or electronic survey, to identify local need. For example, surveys undertaken by CFA identified more properties which had suffered flooding than in official/insurance records. HWTRA used local by-laws to minimise the disruption to tenants caused by contractors on major neighbouring infra-structure project. As organisations became established the need for primary research passed but volunteers stressed the ongoing importance of

being able to access information about regulations and procedures through the internet and other sources.

Perhaps the most important human resource available to organisations was time. All organisations relied heavily, or exclusively, on volunteers. Numbers started low with perhaps just one or two activists but needed to expand rapidly if goals were to be met. Some volunteers spoke of the huge number of hours they devoted to their groups with daily involvement the case for many. Volunteers were used in every conceivable role from marketing, acting as guides, offering advice, running the community shop to supporting victims of domestic violence. Over time groups realised that volunteer training and retention was critical to their survival as attrition rates were high *“you start with ten volunteers and it could be reduced to two within the year and if you really want to continue going you need to find a way of constantly replenishing your stock of volunteers”* (HH).

When considering the resources they needed to establish their organisations respondents frequently referred to the importance of luck. This was particularly the case in relation to access to skills *“we are unusual in that the skills and talents around the initiative are substantial”* (CC) *“getting the right people at the right time”* (OH) *“we were lucky. A lot of places would not have had all those skills, in one place, at one time”* (NVS). Key to success was the availability of professional people who had time available in order to share their skills with a voluntary group. Given that our research has focused upon what makes voluntary organisations successful it would be useful to explore whether the absence of professional skills is a factor in lack of success and whether there is a class or gender dimension around availability of skills.

Over time groups improved their ability to identify *“what people are particularly good at, either because of their training or profession”* (BVH) and talked of the importance of *“working to strengths”*: generally skills gained through working life experience but also *“life skills in all honesty”* (HWTRA). A number of groups noted the importance of learning from mistakes and of ensuring that they brought in *“new blood”* to help their group to evolve.

Having begun their group with a combination of passion and vision respondents noted the need for different skills sets once they were established. All groups spoke of a need for delivery and organisation skills. Project management and financial planning skills also became more important. Over time activists developed political skills as they started to understand the process and actions needed to influence policy or get a local politician to support them *“after that it was more about lobbying and getting our case heard, involving the media, talking to the Council and officers and that was new to me and a really steep learning curve”* (CFA). For CC these skills came from a volunteer who had worked with local councils. Others learned through doing or through activity in other voluntary sector groups.

Perhaps the greatest need at the consolidation stage was for technical skills “*we moved from enthusiasm to highly technical skills about managing an asset*” (BVH). These differed between groups depending on the types of assets and activities they managed. BH and others spoke of the need for safe-guarding skills that enabled them to have an effective health and safety policy “*it’s not just writing a policy.....it’s implementing it and that’s the understanding, people can have a policy stuck in a folder, but it’s a living document*” (OH). Groups with shops or cafes needed to develop food hygiene skills. Some needed to learn about licensing regulations or other legal requirements. Once skills needs became technical groups were less able to source human capital through their own personal networks. Some attended training courses to learn what they needed. HWTRA attended local authority courses on housing and anti-social behaviour, others on food hygiene and safe-guarding. Once courses had been attended they shared their new technical skills with other volunteers. A particular skills set around understanding jargon and policy and “*the legal side*” was somewhat harder to access. Individuals with experience in the voluntary sector were particularly useful in these areas. Where highly specific skills were needed, for example around asset transfer, HWTRA used a solicitor to access expertise, a resource paid for through their acquired knowledge of housing legislation. CACA filled gaps in knowledge by hiring outside experts with knowledge about project management and volunteer training. BVH brought in an architect, pro-bono, to help with the design and build of their building. They also developed a specialist group of volunteers with building maintenance skills to help maintain their asset. Several groups noted they needed better marketing skills.

CC had been so successful developing skills and knowledge around running a local group that they entered all their skills and ideas on a website and were considering selling their knowledge about how to organise community events amongst many activities, to other groups. They were also, more than any other group, able to access technical skills within their community “*and we have a printer offering his services, a graphic designer offering her services, a website designer offering his...*” (CC). This was possibly because they focussed quite heavily on bringing the local business community into their actions and thus could access professional services.

Time continued to be important for achieving goals. Indeed as some assets became operational their need for volunteers increased. NVS had 90 volunteers regularly committing time to running the community shop, while CC noted “hundreds and hundreds of hours go into CC”. Groups began to recognise that recruiting and retaining volunteers required certain sets of skills, knowledge and interpersonal abilities. They had to learn how to support and supervise their volunteers. They recognised people’s motivations for volunteering and tried to provide for volunteers’ needs. In particular this meant ensuring that volunteers had the opportunity to meet and socialise and develop the affective emotions needed to bond them to their peers or the asset, thereby retaining volunteers in the longer term. Some organisations we visited were very good at retaining volunteers sustaining management groups over many years. This was particularly the case where volunteers received regular encouragement, recognition of their labour and support as well as being able to see the

outcomes of their involvement: the opening of the new village hall and community shop; becoming, in the case of HWTRA) a Tenant Management Organisation able to address estate disrepair,

## Economic Capital

All but one respondent discussed the need for funds to ensure the continuation of their activities *“yes I suppose funding is always at the top of every list, because you can’t possibly run a group, even a volunteer group, without money”* (OH). For HH, having raised substantial capital monies, the availability of ongoing revenue funding was the biggest challenge for their future. OH needed money for equipment and music and noted that recent cuts had meant that free courses for volunteers were no longer available. HWTRA became a Community Interest Company so they could access a wider source of funds but both they and OH noted that the short-term nature of much of the funding available was problematic both in terms of longer term sustainability. Some felt that fund-raising diverted energy from the organisation’s primary cause. Only CC felt that the lack of a secure source of funds was unproblematic *“I think it’s important to not have too much money in the beginning...I wouldn’t have had to beg and borrow, therefore I wouldn’t have established the relationships that we quickly did with the schools and the churches and the local people”* (CC).

Several groups were able to raise funds through running events and valued a sense of self-reliance rather than exclusively, or predominantly, relying on external sources of finance. CFA focused their activities around fundraising for flood defences believing that they needed to raise substantial moneys to demonstrate to the Environment Agency that they were “serious”. Through various pub quizzes and concerts they raised £15,000. They and HH also used a subscription approach to raise small amounts of money. DD used this to pay for the insurance costs and their premises hire. CC relied quite heavily on donations from local businesses and people. They offered the opportunity to sponsor trees and used residents’ electricity sources when running events.

Others with an asset were able to use parts of their building to generate an income. HH generated income from its cafe and shop, as did the community shop. Respondents also noted how they used their own money to help their group. HWTRA’s chairman estimated that £3500 of his own money was spent on various inputs over several years. Often volunteers dug into their own pockets when they were unable to access small amounts of funds, such as £200 for an event (HWTRA).

Over time some of our respondents had been very successful in accessing funds. CFA set out to raise enough funds for flood defences and was able to access this money from the Environment Agency and County Council. Others received money from the Heritage Lottery Fund or the BIG Lottery, from District Councils, Charities, and a TV restoration programme. Often they mixed and matched funding sources to try to achieve their goals. Those groups with a faith foundation were able to lean on their religious establishments in tough times to meet funding short falls. For many of the groups *“lack of funds is biggest challenge for the future – need to be able to pay the rent and buy equipment and resources, get electrics checked etc”* (OH). Often the amounts needed were relatively

small “*I put on a community event on the estate that cost £70/£80, and in fairness, that’s probably one of the most successful times. We had about 70/80 people come out for that, so funding doesn’t necessarily come into it but it certainly helps*” (HWTRA). Without funds it was difficult to continue or expand activities “*I’ve just applied for a grant from Children in Need and it’s come back and I’ve got to prove how we do child protection training on a regular basis. Well we have to pay for it so we can’t do it*” (OH). Even CC which stated it had minimal need for funding acknowledged the need for a low level of income to cover liability and other costs amounting to about £1000 each year. Individual volunteers often dug into their own pockets to access funds for everyday running.

For at least three groups, economic capital was about more than raising funds to sustain their activity. Rather, their activities related to wider community economic capital. NVS were explicit in their aim of ensuring money remained within the village, circulated around the community shop, rather than money ‘flowing out’ to out of area supermarkets. They also noted that all the shop refurbishments had been carried out by local traders. For BVH, the village hall, as well as providing a focus for social activity, generated income for a wide range of local groups with the ultimate intention of monies generated from, for example, wedding receptions being used to cross-subsidise other activities.

## Physical and Environmental Capital

The presence of social space was of variable importance depending on the nature of the group. Some groups did not require fixed space and instead tended to meet in local pubs, houses or the church (CC & CFA). Others depended upon community spaces. CACA used an office provided by a local housing organisation to offer a service to new migrants arriving in the area while FIVE needed a small “hub” to develop their services which depended upon matching volunteers with voluntary opportunities. A final group of organisations based their activity on the development of physical community assets. HH focused on bringing a rundown empty hall back into use so that the community would have a resource. Accessing a premises was critical for the community shop and HH came in to operation because their building, which included an old Chapel with a Section 106 planning agreement that it should be used for the community, was left without a function after the land around it was sold off for development. Over time physical space became more important. For BVH and BH the management of the building was of primary importance in their long term success “*what we tried to do in this hall is make it very welcoming, warm....It’s a sort of independent space....and it’s a space for learning as well as socialising so that’s what you know...a learning space*” (OH). CC spoke of the growing realisation of the need to be physically present in a space “virtual communication is not the same”, and to have somewhere to store their assets.

While not all respondents required physical space all were dependent on donations of equipment such as computers, or items for use in activities such as toys, food, printers, ink or dressing up clothes.



Further, for four of the groups interviewed, there was an interplay between human, social, economic and environmental capital. CFA came into existence to protect the village from flooding. HWTRA's goal was to address disrepair and neglect in the built environment and green spaces surrounding the estate. HH were committed to preserving bringing an historic building into community use. CC aimed to ensure that a vibrant local shopping centre was protected and developed at a time when there was concern around the decline of the local high street.

## Discussion

The civil society actions explored emerged in response to a motivator: be that environmental problems, fear of losing a local asset, unfair treatment, or unmet need. A combination of emotions, predominantly transitory; and personality; were a clear starting point for each of the groups. Emotion is commonplace in human existence; every human experiences emotion; so why do some emotional reactions to events lead to civil society action that can endure over decades while others rapidly dissipate? The answer may lie in the interaction between emotion and other forms of capitals and resources. Emotional reactions to events need to be shared by and with others. While one person may initiate action, they were always dependent upon attracting others to their cause. Shared outrage or concern provided common ground. Those experiencing the emotional reactions needed to have the right personality and skills to reach out and share their emotion with others. For campaigning groups such as CFA and HWTRA, moving from the expression of raw emotion to a more controlled, rational and argued response became a key transition in affecting change

In the early stages of actions personality appeared to be of primary importance: the ability to motivate others, be inspiring, listen and engage. The possession of social networks was an additional factor important in moving forward. Leaders initially reached out to people in their own social networks. The most important people to access in the early stages were those who were well networked. Indeed, their being networked, and the quality in terms of skills, knowledge and experience of those networks might be described as a resource in itself. Extensive and diverse networks were of critical importance because they facilitated access to resources that would form important ingredients in the achievement of social action. Thus as Foley and Edwards (1999) argue the social capital that provided the framework for a group to establish was necessary because extensive networks enabled access to human capital thereby providing the skills and some of the other resources necessary to begin to bring about social change. Social capital could help facilitate access to financial and physical resources as well as protect environmental capital. In the early stages these were likely to come from individual or business donations. Later human capital in the form of knowledge about how to apply for funds, often developed elsewhere in the voluntary sector, could also help facilitate access to money and other resources.

By the consolidation phase many of the respondent organisations could be argued to have created a field for action emerging from the bringing together of different types of capital or resources for the common good (Bourdieu 1984). Once these capitals and resources were in place further work was

required for both sustainability and development. Sustaining actions required the nurturing of affective emotion, and accessing fresh human capital, often outside individual personal networks. By the consolidation phase social actors had a full grasp of the importance of networking for accessing resources and a clear idea of the specific skills and knowledge they needed to access. Once local networks were exhausted they networked actively and more strategically, reaching out to similar groups elsewhere in the UK and to those with political power locally or regionally, attending events run by membership or infrastructure organisations or, as a last resort, buying in expertise. Comparing the establishment and consolidation phases we can see a shift in the types of social capital mobilised as groups moved from using local peer networks that might be described as “bonding” capital, to connecting with groups in other locations (bridging capital) and finally to outside organisations and experts (linking capital) (Putnam 2000).

## Conclusion

Given that successful social action depends on so many ingredients being available at the same place and at the right time it is hardly surprising that so many respondents referred to their groups’ evolution as “lucky”. The right people, in the right place, at the right time – with a shared cause. Research has clearly demonstrated that some localities enjoy higher levels of civil society action than others labelled charity deserts (Mohan, 2012). To what extent does this uneven distribution occur as the result of luck? Clearly further research is needed to explore the differential access of communities to social, human, physical and economic capital. It seems likely that areas where there are lower levels of skills and expertise or less time available to volunteer will struggle to establish social actions, regardless of the presence of emotional reactions to problems or motivated individuals keen to respond.

So what can policymakers tasked with stimulating social action at local level do to support and encourage action and help improve sustainability? All the ingredients we have discussed in this paper are necessary. While emotion can be managed, it cannot be manufactured (Hochschild 1983). Thus action is unlikely to occur where people do not feel the need to act. Where emotion is present, action can be supported through helping to facilitate networking, through running networking events within neighbourhoods or simply offering a space to meet. Access to human capital can be improved through provision of free expertise that groups can utilise if they require advice or knowledge. Some shared physical space, and at the very least seedcorn funds need to be provided, to enable groups to meet and purchase the resources they need to become active. Unless these ingredients are available to all there will invariably be an element of luck in the emergence, establishment and sustainability of social action below the radar. Yet ideas of luck, or ‘chance’ are almost wholly absent in the voluntary sector literature. Further, much of that literature focuses, along with a range of recent policy initiatives, on the role of social capital. Yet, as noted, high levels of social capital, particularly bonding capital, do not, necessarily, lead to social action – though it may facilitate this process. Any discussion about the interplay of different forms of capital is also limited. What may, therefore, be necessary, is to develop a more sophisticated notion of community capitals (Butler Flora undated) in which the interplay between



social networks, emotional, economic, human, environmental and, indeed, cultural capital is understood in order to fully understand the factors which sustain, and the characteristics of, successful social action and small scale civil society groups.

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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